

DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 195 313

JC 800 649

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 TITLE The Unity of the Practical Arts and the Liberal Arts.
 PUB DATE [80]
 NOTE 12p.
 EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
 DESCRIPTORS College Role: Community Colleges: *Curriculum Enrichment: Educational Objectives; Educational Trends: Education Work Relationship: *Liberal Arts: Outcomes of Education: Postsecondary Education: *Professional Education: Specialization: Teacher Attitudes: *Technical Education: Two Year Colleges

ABSTRACT

Given the current emphasis on educational pragmatism and specialization, a rift has developed between the proponents of technical education and the advocates of the liberal arts. The former, who rarely acknowledge that students continue to learn on the job, jealously seize every available credit hour for the presentation of technical knowledge. Many defenders of the liberal arts, on the other hand, scorn the task of providing courses for technical students and pride themselves on their non-utilitarian orientation. However, it is encouraging to note a reversal of this trend in the efforts of many technical educators to broaden their students' learning through the introduction of the humanities into technical and professional education. Such attempts are illustrated in the required medical humanities course at the University of Texas Medical Branch, the humanities program for engineering students at Lehigh University, and the development of a humanities course focusing on reading and writing skills for technical students at a community college in Georgia. Humanities scholars are also demonstrating an increased willingness to restore unity to the practical and liberal arts. Community colleges can foster this unity by increasing the relevance of humanities instruction to technical students and improving the dialogue between liberal arts and technical education faculty. (JP)

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THE UNITY OF THE PRACTICAL ARTS AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

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THE UNITY OF THE PRACTICAL ARTS AND THE LIBERAL ARTS

Americans are a pragmatic people. We measure the value of thoughts and acts by their consequences. What difference does it make if we do this or that? What difference does it make if we espouse this idea or think that thought? Indeed, justification of our very ideals themselves demonstrates our pragmatic nature. We hold ideals such as democracy, freedom, equal rights and opportunities for all, and full development of every person's natural capacities and talents because we believe that such ideals will have beneficial effects for both individuals and for the whole community.

Unfortunately, at times our pragmatism gets reduced to practicality. We restrict our judgments on the difference that acts and thoughts make to measures of quantity alone and lose sight of the degrees of quality that should also count for something. In recent years, for instance, we have come to answer the question "What difference does an education make?" in terms of the job a person can expect to get and the income he or she may earn. We have failed to remember that a job is not the end and ultimate purpose of life. Even for those fortunate individuals whose jobs or vocations provide them with a sense of fulfillment and joy, there is more to life than work. Moreover, a job is more than the application of technical skills or professional knowledge to produce things or to resolve perplexing situations. The job itself will become mere drudgery unless it is done in a context of motivation and interest that gives the worker a sense of usefulness and accomplishment -- the feeling that what he or she does contributes to the betterment of at least a corner of the world.

I am heartened as I go back and forth across the country these days to discover a reaction to the demoralizing reductionism that has plagued us for a decade or more. I am particularly encouraged to find a group such as the Community College Humanities Association, which is dedicated to restoring balance to the education of millions of men and women who need skills and technical training, to be sure, but who also need to know why their life and work is important and worthy. New emphasis on the humanities in community colleges will assist in making their programs truly comprehensive -- programs that will help people know how to live fully and joyfully as well as to make a living. What I have to say to you this morning is intended first to cheer you on in your resolve and second to contribute my bit in developing a case to justify your cause. I shall try to reach these goals by addressing myself to the subject of The Unity of the Practical and Liberal Arts.

It is difficult for me to accept the fact that in our age of specialization -- I might say over-specialization -- we have sharply distinguished between two kinds of learning that are both essential to us as individuals and as a society. We have not always been so precise. Our pioneer ancestors, as they pushed the frontier across the country, founded institutions of liberal learning almost simultaneously with the planting of new settlements. They did not recognize a dichotomy between the practical arts and the liberal arts. They recognized that the one helped them wrest a living from the forest and prairie and that the other brought meaning to their lives, a sense of overarching purpose to their back-breaking labors, and a promise of civility to their struggling, rough-and-ready communities. My grandfather, who as a boy and young man cleared land and ploughed the virgin prairie of Iowa, went each winter to an academy established by his father and

other German settlers of the area on the banks of the upper Mississippi. As his heir, I fully accept and endorse A. N. Whitehead's position that the antithesis drawn between technical education and liberal education is fallacious and needs to be shown up for what it is.

The struggle to reestablish the unity between the practical arts and the liberal arts is a battle on two fronts. On the one side stand the platoons of the practical-minded. They take the position that they must, in a few short terms, teach students everything that they may need to know in their future careers. They rarely acknowledge that students, after they have become practitioners, will continue to learn on the job. Therefore, the practical-minded rarely limit their programs to providing students with the essential requirements for an entry-level position and the basic knowledge on which they can ground their later learning. In their anxiety to stuff students like Strasbourg geese, even though much technical specialized knowledge soon becomes obsolete, they lament that they have too little time to do their job and jealously seize every available credit hour for their courses of study. In this they are abetted by the specialized accrediting agencies who have responsibility not to the student and his or her need for a comprehensive education, but only to a trade or profession.

On the other side stand the defenders of the liberal arts, many of whom come armed with haughty airs of superiority and fire bombastic verbal volleys in disparagement of mere mechanics. Too often they pride themselves on the non-utilitarian nature of their studies, and claim virtue as their invention. Some of them refuse to stoop to what they consider the servile task of providing service courses for technical students. Others, forced by fate and circumstance to perform such lowly chores, only give half-hearted effort to these labors and husband their

strength, their imagination and their inspiration for those students who supposedly can benefit from their superior learning and wisdom. With such attitudes, they "circle the wagons" to defend their ideas of truth and beauty against the barbarians, and do not use their weapons of invention and imagination to establish new fronts where the battle might be fought more effectively.

For some time it has appeared as if the platoons of the practical-minded were winning. In the sixties and seventies, programs leading to technical degrees proliferated and in the seventies, students shifted away from liberal education in such numbers that the proportion of those majoring in technical and professional subjects rose from 38% to 58%. Yet accompanying these changes has been apprehension that over-specialization in technical fields provides only a truncated education. Concerns of this kind have manifested themselves among faculty and administrators in institutions of all sorts. A few examples will illustrate this point.

Three years ago I directed an evaluation of the Institutional Grants Program of the National Endowment for the Humanities. Nearly 20% of the grants made since 1970 were for projects that sought to introduce the humanities and other elements of liberal learning into professional or technical education. The University of Texas Medical Branch at Galveston, for instance, had established a division of medical humanities and used its grant to augment the staff of that division and develop courses in jurisprudence, ethics, history and literature. By the time of our visit, the program was well beyond the pilot stage and medical students were required to take a course in medical humanities in each of the first three years of his or her training. Courses in medical humanities were also being developed for the school of nursing and other fields in allied health sciences.

I was surprised to discover that these courses had strong approval and support from the scientific and clinical faculties of the medical school. The head of the department of surgery was most eloquent and forthright in saying that his initial skepticism about medical humanities had been overcome and that he and his colleagues now realized that study of the humanities used methods which were different from theirs but which required just as much intellectual rigor and discipline. He and his colleagues also believed that study of medical humanities was an important part of their students' training and would make them more effective and responsible physicians and surgeons.

Obviously, postgraduate training in medicine differs in degree if not in kind from vocational education at a community college. Yet the difference is not so great as to invalidate certain comparisons between the two. The one I wish to highlight involves the rationale for combining liberal learning in the humanities with vocational and professional education. The faculty at Galveston Medical Branch justified their program on the grounds that transference of learning in the humanities to the issues and problems of professional practice was not something accomplished automatically. It would only occur effectively if instruction in the humanities took place in the context of professional training. Furthermore, they recognized that to be as significant as possible, students should have instruction that would enhance the depth and sophistication of their understanding of the humanities in correspondence to their advancement in professional fields. These considerations, I will assert, are as important for vocational students in community colleges as they are to medical students. They cannot depend solely on the liberal learning in the humanities and other related fields that they received in high school.

Another interesting case which we reviewed in our evaluation of NEH grants concerned the humanities program developed for engineers at LeHigh. The purpose of this project was to provide courses in literature, art history, history, political science and philosophy that would deepen the understanding and broaden the perspectives of students in engineering. These studies were not intended to give them only basic skills in spoken and written English or to supply them with a patina of culture to be exhibited at cocktail parties. No, their fundamental purpose was to enable future engineers to appreciate the complexities of society and the values by which it operated, to enrich their aesthetic sense, and to make them sensitive to the human needs and interests of those they served. These studies were introduced with the expectation that such learning would make students better engineers than they would otherwise be. They would be able to design engineering systems that would not only solve practical problems but do so in ways which would improve the quality of life for other human beings.

Finally, a third case: we also evaluated a project at a community college in south Georgia. Here a group of humanities faculty, in conversation with members of the vocational faculty, devised a special humanities course for technical students. It had two objectives: first to prepare technical students to pass a state-wide examination in English composition required of all persons receiving an Associate of Arts degree or advancing from lower to upper division status; and second, to develop such skills through use of readings and written assignments that would help such students gain a sense of purpose and self-reliance by learning something about why they are, how individuals and groups are related to one another in society, and what role in serving society their special technical field plays. We found that some of the technical faculty still questioned the wisdom of

surrendering so much of their students to non-vocational studies, but they were pleased that the technical students, since the inception of the new course, had a better record in passing the state English examination than the academic students who followed the conventional program. They also reluctantly admitted that their students might also be more effective practitioners and citizens because of their special courses in the liberal arts and especially in the humanities.

What these cases tell me -- and I could cite others similar to them -- is that among the ranks of the practical-minded there is a significant creative group which perceives the truncated nature of purely technical training and which appreciates the value of liberal learning and breadth of knowledge as a means of improving both the service of technical specialists and their chance of living full, humane lives.

But what of the other side -- the entrenched defenders of liberal education? Perhaps the best answer to this question is the testimony that your presence at a conference like this one gives. You and the larger group of colleagues whom you represent are showing that liberal learning can no longer be conceived as a cloistered matter -- a reclusive private kind of study pursued only for its own sake and for private edification.

If I read the history of liberal learning correctly, I believe you have the right of it. The great prophets and teachers of liberal and humane learning, to whom we all pay homage, never conceived it to be merely an end in itself only pursued in the seclusion of one's study. Erasmus, for instance, wrote his Enchiridion to be a handbook, or to change the metaphor, a side arm for the Christian knight so that he could bring his full powers into play for the good of the commonwealth.

His disciple, Sir Thomas Elyot, in writing his Boke of the Governor, proclaimed that if a person were properly educated in the humanities and liberal learning and joined to liberal education some practical training such as the study of law, then the world would once more see a commonwealth equal to that of the Greeks and Romans.

Of course, Erasmus and Elyot were not thinking of practical arts in all the diversity and variety that they have in our age. We are not only the heirs of the Renaissance humanists but also of the vast educational developments in the last century in our own country, by which the land grant colleges have given the agricultural and mechanical arts a legitimate place in higher education and by which the community colleges have extended systematic training in vocational fields into many other areas. But has the expansion and proliferation of the practical arts made the Renaissance humanists' idea of the compatibility of practical and liberal learning any less applicable than it was?

Indeed, it seems to me that today as well as yesterday two propositions need to be kept clearly in mind by all educators. They are the two sides of a coin. Linked together, they state that man does not live by bread alone, but man does not live long without bread.

A. N. Whitehead saw the force of this point and in his writings argued for programs of education that restored unity to training in the practical arts and learning in the liberal arts. He saw the need for each to reinforce the other. Separately, the one provides skills without direction and purpose and the other degenerates into the futility of dilettantism.

The community colleges of this country, which serve millions of our citizens who may never go beyond the associate of arts degree, have a special

mission to work for the unity of the practical arts and the liberal arts. They, perhaps more than any other sector of higher education, have an opportunity to link the two in a genuinely comprehensive education. In seizing this opportunity, I urge you humanists in the community colleges to be imaginative and creative leaders. You, better than I, know what will be required to advance the cause. But of one thing I am sure, you will need to take the initiative in opening up lines of communication and dialogue with your colleagues of the technical faculties. In such dialogue, you will need to listen as well as speak because you must come to understand what it is that the technical students are learning and what is expected of them. Only then can you begin to perceive how study of the humanities can be offered in such ways as to speak to their condition and needs.

Besides being curious, discerning listeners, we in the humanities must also use imagination and ingenuity in revising instruction in the humanities so that it both keeps faith with its own best traditions and yet becomes relevant to the interests of technical students who will be citizen practitioners of their practical arts. We might ask the questions: Can technology itself be a window into the needs, regulations and dealings of individuals with one another? How can the sense, if awakened by such possibilities, be deepened and enriched by studies in literature, history or philosophy?

What I am pleading for is an effort to overcome the baneful effects of specialization, fragmentation and preciosity in the humanities and liberal learning. Liberal learning is above all an approach to understanding that seeks to discover the whole which makes sense out of the parts. In trying to define liberal learning by an approved canonical list of subjects called the liberal arts, we have lost sight of this fact and fallen into the trap of illiberal overspecialization

ourselves. We need to recover the sense that the truly liberating feature of liberal learning is the insight it brings to the interrelatedness of all aspects of one's life. Each person possesses, and lives by, his or her own world view based on a compendium of experience, knowledge and training. His or her own hope and aspirations for gaining a livelihood is a part of such a world view. The major task of liberal learning is therefore to assure that one's world view is worth something and will enable a person to enjoy a life as full, free and creative as possible.

JAN 09 1980

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